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Moral Doubts Planted in a Jungle of Espionage

It isn't just the Green Berets case, tangled and tortured as it is, that we need to sort out in our minds. It is the whole jungle of furtive double-dealing into which governments are thrust when they use secret guile and force. On the derring-do of the "Special Forces," the American liberal is likely to be shocked. The moral conservative is deeply troubled because he approves of the anti-Communist ends but wonders about the means. And the man in the crowd shrugs it away with the reflection that life is pretty hairy and grimy anyway, so why should governments be an exception?

The actual practice of American officials has ranged from Henry Stimson's prim "Gentlemen don't read each other's mail" (about a budget proposal for code-breaking) to the current jargon for ordering a man's execution: "Terminated with extreme prejudice."

The French, in Indo-China and Algeria, had a whole officer-corps corrupted by the underground ruthlessness they developed in fighting elusive enemies.

In Russia's case, it is not only the spy service abroad but much of the society that is darkened by the shadow of spies, as witness the diary jottings of Anatoly Kuznetsov, which has the authentic Kafkaesque ring of a spy-haunted bureaucracy, whatever some of our more high-minded moralists may think of Anatoly's own opportunism.

The Chinese have a heritage of centuries of secretiveness under an emotion-drained mask.

The British alone have managed to square their Puritan tradition with an adeptness at spying, but not without an immense struggle which shows itself in their brilliant espionage novels.

The Americans still trail wisps of innocence after them, as they come from God, Who is their home, but it is an innocence that has been sadly frayed by their rude encounters "in the back alleys all over the world," as Dean Rusk put it when he lapsed into candor. In those alleys, he added, "there's no quarter asked and none given."

The two earlier Kennedys expressed better than anyone the American mixture of being idealists but also of being tough cookies when it was needed. That may have been what led Jack Kennedy to authorize the Bay of Pigs bash to his grief, and what led his brother to call for more and more Green Berets — 50,000 was what he once wanted. Well, eight of them got stashed away in a military jail for a spell, presumably for being more zealous than the occasion warranted.

Andrew Tully, in his chatty

journalistic book, "The Super Spies," gives us some of the more effective recent American espionage forays (on the Czech invasion, the Israel-Egyptian war, the Russian-Chinese struggle), although he is less informative about the American flaps and flops. The chances are that America's contribution to the spy tradition will lie not in the CIA "spooks" but mainly in the computer-oriented work of the National Security Agency, especially in cryptography, and possibly of the Defense Intelligence Agency. It is a question of assembling and processing vast masses of data, with methods very similar to the research done by the big corporations. In an electronic age you get electronic espionage.

But in any age, even ours, you can't evade the haunting moral doubts. What gives any of us — Gen. Carter of the NSA or Gen. Carroll of the DIA, Allen Dulles or Richard Helms of the CIA or Col. Rheaume of the Special Forces — the right to play God and dispose of a man's life? The great historic answer was Machiavelli's, that there is a "gulf between how one should live and how one does live" and that "a man who wants to act virtuously in every way necessarily comes to grief among so many who are not virtuous."

This is the "us or them" answer: You play dirty because even if you don't the others will. But it strikes me as rationalization rather than answer. The real answer is that no one gives us the right to play God, not even the conviction some have that they are doing God's work in playing dirty.

Over the eons, out of some mud and water and sunlight, a man was formed, partly to play rough, partly to hold on to some innocence. And it will be more eons before he stops playing God or playing spy or playing shocked liberal and becomes clear-eyed and human.

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